

Review of *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* by Matthew Brim (Duke University Press)

by Adrian Switzer | Book Reviews, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

ABSTRACT The review focuses on the practical work of *Poor Queer Studies*. Rather than retheorize queer studies from the class perspective of "rich" and "poor," Brim makes a case study of his work as a professor of queer studies at the College of Staten Island (CSI). Insisting on the particularity of his and his students' relationship to queer studies, Brim makes an example of the work they do together in the classroom, and the ways they live their studies on public transit, at home with their families, and in their part-time jobs. This review questions the extent to which poor queer studies differs from the modern university's reduction of all education to career-training. Brim's praxis of poor queer studies is always undertaken with individual students in specific socio-economic circumstances—a particularity that makes it different than market-driven job-training. This review also raises questions about the general applicability of this case study. Would poor queer studies work elsewhere as it does at CSI? Berlant's idea of exemplarity is helpful in answering this question. Unlike examples that confirm a norm, there are examples that change norms. Brim's example of poor queer studies works to exemplarily change what counts as normal. Practically, this means no longer thinking of queer studies as operating without class distinction—and reclaiming part of the work of the discipline from seemingly classless rich queer studies at places like Yale and New York University.

KEYWORDS poverty, queer, praxis, university, academia, public education, case study

Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University. By Matthew Brim.
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In *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University*, Matt Brim makes a case study of his own academic circumstances to exemplify, variously, what queer studies does. Accordingly, *Poor Queer Studies* begins with what Brim terms a "living archive" of the queer work he and his fellow faculty do at the College of Staten Island (CSI) and ends in his Black Gay Male Literature class, where he and his students work to "addres[s] the systematic failure to teach [and learn] black queer reading practices" (160).

Brim's book locates the praxis of queer studies, and, specifically, of poor queer studies, not only in his classroom at CSI—where he serves as a Professor of Queer Studies in the Department of English—but also in the departmental and interdepartmental exchanges

between queer faculty on campus, off-campus on the buses and ferries students ride to commute to Staten Island from Queens or the Bronx, and in the homes of students in Brim's classes. Brim's experience teaching, for example, Lee Edelman's "anti-social" queer theory of the child as "symbol . . . [of] the heterosexualized political project of reproductive futurism" (144) to a room full of women with children, shows poor queer studies to be a matter of learning how to do queer studies in situ. Such sites include in the grocery store where a student works as a bagger, or on the beat in midtown Manhattan where one of Brim's former students works as a police officer; upon running into that student, Brim thinks to himself, "This cop has queer knowledge with him on the job" (113).

Brim deploys the language of "case study," and of "showing" and "exemplifying" poor queer studies to reflect the style and technique of his book. Each chapter of *Poor Queer Studies* shows the titular practice from a slightly different perspective. For example, Chapter Two is bookended by Judith Butler's joke, "I was off to Yale to be a lesbian" (66) and Eve Sedgwick's advice, "you can write your way out of anywhere" (96), to frame Brim's reflections on the "aspirational mood" of queer studies, generally (85). By aspiring to fuller institutional recognition, or higher national ranking, a discipline committed to criticality ends up unthinkingly "believing in" and enforcing class and race hierarchies (75). How unqueer! If there is a unifying principle to the book it is that the work of poor queer studies needs be done in real time and place with real people. He suggests that this entails more robustly understanding the life circumstances of his students. For example, Brim recalls an Asian-American student who seemed to be gender-conforming, and who never "sa[id] anything" in class, who in fact was transgender and "never t[old] [me], their queer studies professor" (21).

By implication, the foil to Brim's argument, rich queer studies students and professors, do not do what he and his students engage in regularly within and outside of their specific classrooms at their particular university. If, as Brim writes, "[i]t's clear that Rich Queer Studies professors and I don't have the same job" (88), then, again by implication, it should be clear that the work he and his students do is markedly different than the non-work professors and students are not doing in such prestigious departments as Yale and NYU. One way of delineating the difference between poor and rich queer studies would be in terms of theory: rich queer studies departments emphasize theory, while poor queer studies cannot help but emphasize practice. Yet, Brim explains that his preference in the book is "not to parse out queer theory from queer studies" (90); rather, Brim "emphasize[s] the personal and institutional class and status divide among those of us working in queer studies" (90).

Brim suggests that the theory/practice dialectic is not particular enough to capture the site-specific class and race politics that operate in Brim's classrooms—and beyond his classrooms—at CSI. Instead, he frames the book through the dialectic of "poor" and "rich." Though among the most "rigid [and] stale" class terms (90), Brim adopts them as sufficiently fine-grained to carry out a place-based, auto-theoretical, problematizing of classism and racism in the academic field of queer studies. As he writes early in the book, poor queer studies "might be understood as an effort to make the comparison between Poor Queer Studies and Rich Queer Studies a bit more odious so that their class- and

status-based incommensurabilities can be exploited rather than invisibilized or naturalized" (88).

That Brim shows what poor queer studies can do by giving examples from his students' part- or full-time workplaces should not mislead the reader—he is well aware of the critiques levelled against the neoliberal academy. Indeed, Brim recognizes the uncomfortable proximity between his own interest in the work of poor queer studies and the goals of today's universities to professionalize all students. Chapter three, "The Queer Career," argues for the working efficacy of poor queer studies. This chapter distinguishes the positive idea of vocational queer studies from the negative critique of contemporary higher education as beholden to capitalist interests, where "'student' has become synonymous with 'consumer' and . . . the student departs an ever-debtor" (102). Undoubtedly, the neoliberalism of the contemporary academy involves far more than the socio-economics of consumerism and debt. Brim's effort to reclaim some of the "terms for thinking about students and/as workers" (102) that have been more and more imperialized by capitalism is admirable. However, that such an effort is required to reclaim "organized labor" to describe what (already) working queer studies students and professors do is a diminishingly small gain—particularly when defined as a matter of "asking how the field [of queer studies] can inform and improve the work lives of . . . students: the sex store employee, social service agency case worker," etc. (105). Brim does not fully account for the difference between a neoliberal-minded administrator's goal to prepare students for the market-determined workforce and a poor queer studies professor's efforts to "improve the work lives . . . of students" (105).

The personal and institutional specificity of the book—again, it is about a particular queer studies professor from Indiana teaching groups of individual queer studies students at CSI, an institution with its own particular history and presence in the field—offsets some of the concern about the neoliberalism of "vocational queer studies." Brim is not training his students to be better—i.e., more efficient and productive—workers in a market-defined, generic sense. Rather, Brim aims to "help students envision possibilities for queering nonqueer careers" in which they already work (117). Brim and his students are not doing the critical, intersectional work of poor queer studies; they demonstrate what such work involves at an underfunded outer-borough public New York City university where in any given class, for example, there will be a number of women raising children while completing their degrees. Doing poor queer studies with these students in the here and now of CSI is different, Brim maintains, than job-training the next-generation late-capitalist workforce.

For all its critical potential, particularism also raises questions of how applicable a place-bound, autobiographical study is to other places and to other people. As readers of Brim's work, and as potential practitioners of poor queer studies in our own given circumstances, we can put the question in terms of exemplarity: are Brim's classes at CSI in some sense exemplary of the important work of poor queer studies? How do we follow Brim's example without obscuring the critical force of his particular place and time? Equally, how do we follow Brim's example without diminishing our own specific criticality? Early in the book, Brim appeals to Lauren Berlant to help think through such questions: "'When it doesn't work to change the conditions of exemplarity . . . something is . . . remanded to banal

particularity. When it does, a personal or collective sensorium shifts'" (Berlant quoted in Brim, 62). An example that conforms to and confirms a norm is little more than another instance of the same. An example that reveals the very conditions of normativity changes both the norm and what it means to be exemplary. In its work of changing the conditions of what exemplary queer studies is and what it does—a change already somewhat affected in the reader's desire to know if that example is an instance of poor or of rich queer studies—Brim's book shifts our personal and collective sense of the discipline itself.

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